

2014/15

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Pocket Watch – More PISA Lessons

Introduction

It's been a couple of months since the last set of PISA test results for 15 year olds were announced but PISA in one shape or another remains very much in the news at present. As experts debate the virtues or otherwise of the whole PISA exercise, the Education Minister has headed off to examine how a top performing country (or part of) does it while the programme itself prepares to road test the next round of tests due to be taken in 2015 and reported in December 2016. Whether we like it or not, politicians attach enormous importance to these tests and education policy is often based on the outcomes, so they're worth keeping an eye on.

Shanghai Mission

Over the last week, the Education Minister has been leading a delegation to Shanghai-China to find out just how they have managed to top the PISA table in core subjects like reading, maths and science as compared to the UK's position of 23rd, 25th and 21st respectively. Policy tourism, as it's sometimes called can be a risky business particularly when the performance measures themselves are controversial and the context is so different but the Minister herself seems convinced that particularly in a subject like maths, a combination of longer hours, specialised teaching and a focus on core essentials, offer a pretty good start.

There are of course other factors. The Deputy Chair of ACME (the Advisory Committee on Maths Education) for example has highlighted "*the wider educational and cultural contexts,*" for which read a strong appetite or perhaps pressure for success, not always a positive as many have noted. Ray Tarleton from the NSCL has highlighted how much emphasis is put on initial teacher training and continuous professional development while the Institute of Education's Chris Husbands has identified three factors: "*cultural attitudes towards education and learning; the organisation of schooling and the curriculum; and teaching and pedagogy.*" Some of this has already been drip fed into the changes that the Government is introducing at present including the changes in the new national curriculum, the introduction of new specialist maths schools and the attention being given to teacher training. Two big challenges arguably remain: increasing the amount of time in the curriculum given to maths without unbalancing requirements for other subjects and encouraging more young people to continue with some form of maths beyond 16 where the current Core Maths proposals still leave some gaps.

The next PISA round

As indicated, work begins shortly on field testing the 2015 PISA tests where the main emphasis will be on science but will also include 'collaborative problem solving.' It's an intriguing area and one that different nations put different amounts of emphasis on but one which is increasingly being valued in modern economies. It's defined here as: "*the capacity of the individual to effectively engage in a process whereby two or more agents attempt to solve a problem by sharing the understanding and effort required to come to a solution and pooling their knowledge, skills and efforts to reach that solution.*" It's a skill that has been assessed before and for those wondering how this can be achieved it's based on three major competencies: establishing and maintaining shared understanding; taking appropriate action to solve the problem; establishing and maintaining team organisation. It should be an area in which we do well.



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